



On Such Slender Threads does the Fate of Nations Depend

The Second United States Sharpshooters defend the Union left

Timothy J. Orr

For Sergeant James Mero Matthews, a twenty-three-year-old typesetter from Rockland, Maine, serving in Company D, 2nd United States Sharpshooters, Thursday morning, July 23, 1863, dawned “pleasant, with the appearance of a hot day.”¹ One hundred twenty-five tired Sharpshooters, fresh from their victory at the Battle of Gettysburg twenty days earlier, trudged along the road from Front Royal, Virginia, heading toward Piedmont. By eleven o’clock, as the sun neared its zenith, the command halted to take water and rest. Exceedingly hungry, they began chanting, “Hardtack! Hardtack! Hardtack!” Normally, Union soldiers derided the tasteless army cracker, but now, the fatigued Sharpshooters demanded something—anything—to eat.

The Sharpshooters’ raucous clamor attracted the attention of their brigade commander, Brigadier General John Henry Hobart Ward, bringing him to the head of the column. Unwilling to accept any misbehavior, Ward drew his pistol, shouting, “God-damned your souls to hell! The next man that says ‘hardtack,’ I will put daylight right through him!”² This temporarily quieted the unruly marksmen. Ward holstered his sidearm and turned his horse to leave. But, just as Ward showed his back, all of the Sharpshooters roared in unison: “HARDTACK!” Ward again moved to un-holster his pistol, but this time he stopped short. He heard a sound that chilled him to the bone. Every Sharpshooter clicked the hammer of his rifle to the “ready” position. At that moment, Ward probably reconsidered his situation. These men were the Union’s elite troops known as Berdan’s Sharpshooters, specially drawn from across the North for their prowess at long-range marksmanship. The men of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters had fought in numerous engagements, including Falmouth, Rappahannock Station, Second Manassas, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. These men knew how to kill; they had done it often and without remorse. Would they dare shoot their general in the back for threatening them? Ward probably also recalled the difficult situation in which he placed these men just twenty-one days earlier, ordering them to hold a forward position on the extreme left flank of the Union Army. There, on their own, they faced an attack delivered by more than 7,300 Confederate infantry. These men had done their duty; now they just wanted something to eat. Ward did not draw his pistol. Without turning around, he rode away silently. He dared not try anything, so wrote Private Wyman Silas White of Company F, “for he heard a lot of rifles click.”³

Civil War military history has paid substantial attention to the importance of generalship and tactics to explain the outcome of battles, but scholars have only recently begun to explore the ways that soldiers themselves shaped the course of victory and defeat. No better example presents itself than that of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters and their defense of the Union left flank on July 2, 1863, at the Battle of Gettysburg. The Sharpshooters' training and squad-level tactics greatly enhanced their individual killing power. Additionally, their rapid firing, breech-loading weapons and their effective use of terrain added to their tactical advantage. At the John Snyder farm at the foot of Big Round Top, circumstances placed 169 men of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters on the advanced left flank of the Union Army of the Potomac on July 2, directly in front of an attacking Confederate division under the command of Major General John Bell Hood, 7,375 officers and men strong. The 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' defense of the Snyder farmyard and their withdrawal over Big Round Top have been long overlooked and under-appreciated in the greater history of the Battle of Gettysburg. The Sharpshooters' cunning tactics and incredible marksmanship substantially delayed and disorganized Hood's attack on July 2, buying much-needed time for Union officers to reinforce the Army of the Potomac's weakened left flank.

The U. S. Sharpshooters were the brainchild of Hiram Berdan, a forty-year-old inventor from New York. Raised in Michigan, Berdan grew up in the company of sport shooters. By the outbreak of the Civil War, he stood among the nation's leading competitive marksmen. In 1861, he proposed to raise a new "corps" of riflemen to augment the ranks of the Union Army. Under the direction of the War Department, he began a nationwide search for the best marksmen. Each applicant had to pass a shooting test using his own rifle, hitting a target at 200 yards distance from a standing or kneeling position, placing ten consecutive shots within a ten-inch diameter. Hardly intimidated by these strict qualifications, members of the North's shooting clubs and local militias responded to the call. On November 30, 1861, after a successful recruiting season, Berdan received a commission as colonel of U. S. volunteers. By late March 1862, he had raised almost one thousand men, taking command of a ten-company regiment designated the 1st U. S. Sharpshooters, composed of riflemen from New York, Michigan, Wisconsin, New Hampshire, and Vermont.⁴



Colonel Hiram Berdan. USAMHI

Colonel Berdan's regiment received heavy publicity, and local newspapers encouraged young men to "try out" for this elite organization. One New Hampshire newspaper wrote: "This corps is designed for especial duty and will be independent in their movements of any body of men attached to the United

States Army, and is believed to be the most desirable one into which to enlist for the service of the country.”⁵ The thrill of becoming a U. S. Sharpshooter filled applicants with exhilaration. The shooting test was a public spectacle that swelled their pride. On August 11, 1862, fifteen-year-old Charles Fairbanks of Bethel, Vermont, left his farm against his father’s wishes to enlist as a U. S. Sharpshooter. Fairbanks recalled:

How well I remember the day! . . . [Captain Homer R.] Stoughton called me up to make the target which I gladly did, though I must confess it was with fear and almost trembling that I took the rifle in hand to determine whether or not I was fit for a sharpshooter. There was a large crowd of townspeople present, who seemed to be about evenly divided in favor of my going to war [on account of my age], but after making the first shot at the ten inch ring target, there was a cheer from the spectators, for I had put a bullet nearly in the center of the bulls eye which was about two inches in diameter. The remaining nine shots were put inside the ring . . . with a cheer from the crowd after each shot.⁶

Recruits flocked to join the U. S. Sharpshooters after Colonel Berdan promised to arm and outfit his enlisted men with special weapons and equipment. Berdan vowed to issue his men the Christian Sharps’ Model 1859 .52-caliber breech-loading rifle, fitted with a double-set trigger and the R. S. Lawrence pellet primer system. The Sharps Rifle, patented in 1848, used a sliding breech-block mechanism, enabling its user to load a paper or linen black powder cartridge into the breech with twice the speed of a standard muzzle-loading weapon. Additionally, the pellet primer system—although often unused by the Sharpshooters during combat for its suspected unreliability—allowed soldiers to fire the weapon without capping. This fast reloading capability saved Sharpshooters’ lives in countless situations. For instance, during the march to Gettysburg, Private Edwin Aldritt, a twenty-three-year-old native of Chanhassen, Minnesota, serving in Company A, 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters, received orders to scout along the Union line of march. While approaching the crest of a large hill, Aldritt encountered a Confederate straggler. At a distance of twenty feet, Aldritt and the Confederate soldier fired simultaneously. The Confederate’s bullet “scorched” Aldritt’s ribs—“a half an inch deeper and his would have brought me down,” Aldritt remembered. Aldritt’s bullet grazed the Confederate soldier’s nose and cheek, and both began to reload. Aldritt continued:

As he had an old muzzle-loading squirrel rifle and I had a new breech-loader, I had my cartridge in firsthand. I yelled at him to throw up his hands. “You’ve got the drop on me, Yank,” he said and threw down his gun. He seemed greatly bothered because I got the drop on him and finally asked me what state I was from. I told him Minnesota. “Oh,” he said, “you’re one of them Minnesoty woodsmen. No wonder you got the drop on me.”⁷

Berdan also outfitted his men with distinctive uniforms. The U. S. Sharpshooters received the federal pattern 1858 frock coat dyed dark green instead of the standard blue. The color had a two-fold purpose: It mirrored European light infantry regiments, reflecting the Sharpshooters’ role as skirmishers, and it also served as a primitive form of camouflage, concealing the Sharpshooters behind dense spring and summer foliage. In addition, the Sharpshooters received non-reflective, black rubber buttons, preventing solar reflection from giving away their position. The Sharpshooters also received heavy leather leggings to aid in forest fighting and a unique Prussian-pattern cowhide knapsack with the hair still attached—dubbed “hair trunks” by the Sharpshooters who wore them—created by Tiffany’s of New York. When completely outfitted, the “Green Coats,” or the “Green Demons,” as some Confederate newspapers called them, made quite a striking appearance.

Due to the overwhelming success of Berdan’s recruiting efforts, the War Department authorized him to raise a second regiment of sharpshooters between October and December 1861. This regiment numbered eight companies—or eight hundred officers and men—and consisted of men drawn from six different states: Company A (Minnesota), Company B (Michigan), Company C (Pennsylvania), Company D

(Maine), Company E (Vermont), Company F (New Hampshire), Company G (New Hampshire), and Company H (Vermont).

As the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters went into their camp of instruction during the spring of 1862, their sister regiment, the 1st U. S. Sharpshooters, had its mettle tested during the Peninsula campaign. Expectedly, the 1st U. S. Sharpshooters performed two key functions during this campaign: skirmishing and sharp-shooting. Skirmishers were nothing new to western militaries, as they had been used by professional armies for more than a century. Skirmish lines consisted of infantrymen fighting in dispersed formations. Starting from a standard two-rank battle line, skirmish lines deployed after officers dispersed each cluster, or “cell,” of four men by a distance of twenty paces. Once the battle line broke into cells, the four cell-mates separated into a single line, each man taking intervals five paces from his nearest file partner (rear rank men on the left, and front rank men on the right). From this formation, skirmishers could keep up a constant fire, even while advancing or withdrawing. While each front rank man loaded his weapon, his rear rank file partner covered him. A skirmisher only fired after his partner had reloaded. Skirmishers could advance over open or broken terrain with relative ease, gathering crucial intelligence about enemy formations or delaying an enemy advance until infantry in line of battle arrived.

Although skirmishers remained an essential piece of nineteenth-century battle tactics, few American Civil War units consistently operated as skirmishers during the early part of the war. Typically, regiments deployed only one or two companies as skirmishers to screen their advances, and quite often, these companies rotated into and out of skirmish duty on a regular basis. The U. S. Sharpshooters, however, operated as skirmishers on a regimental level, fighting this way in almost every combat encounter. By specializing in this difficult and exhaustive duty—skirmish drill was performed at the run—the U. S. Sharpshooters took especial pride in this important battlefield function.

Major Charles P. Mattocks, a replacement officer who took command of the 1st U. S. Sharpshooters in 1864, described their skirmish prowess:

The sharp shooters have a very peculiar duty in action. They are the skirmishers who go ahead and ‘kick up the muss’ as they say. In fact it is almost a new branch of service. . . . We have some fancy movements in skirmish drill. Everything is done by bugle calls. One Faking thing to do is to sound ‘lie down’ & then ‘forward.’ The ‘green breeches’ creep as close to the ground as so many mice. Sometimes we sound ‘commence firing,’ while they still keep up the creeping, or more properly dragging. . . . I was always fond of skirmish drill, but never more so than at the present time. . . . They understand skirmish calls on the bugle so well that it is rare sport to drill the battalion.⁸

The Sharpshooters’ second function, sharp-shooting, proved somewhat more revolutionary and considerably more controversial. For this service, Berdan’s men frequently used telescopic target rifles, some as heavy as thirty or forty pounds. With these weapons, the Sharpshooters fired upon selected targets—signal corps stations, artillery emplacements, observation posts, or sudden targets of opportunity—with precision accuracy. The U. S. Sharpshooters could kill enemy soldiers at distances of more than a thousand yards with these magnificent rifles. However, the Sharpshooters’ calculating decisions to kill often shocked average infantrymen, Union and Confederate alike. Captain Francis A. Donaldson of the 71st Pennsylvania Infantry described the Sharpshooters’ tactics in a letter to his brother written on April 21, 1862. Donaldson wrote that the Sharpshooters “speak confidently of killing, without the slightest difficulty, at a mile distant.” Donaldson noted how groups of Sharpshooters often roamed the forward lines, “strutting leisurely along,” looking for careless enemy soldiers to kill, while his own men “look askance or rather shrink from them.”⁹

Donaldson recalled how, one day, “four of these demons” occupied a post near his regiment where they spotted four Confederate soldiers moving along the enemy works. During the ensuing exchange of rifle fire, only three of the Sharpshooters elected to shoot, easily killing three of the four Confederate soldiers. The last Confederate soldier, “after standing in a state of bewilderment,” jumped down behind the bodies for protection. He called for aid, and shortly afterwards, four more Confederate soldiers arrived, bearing

stretchers to collect the dead. Donaldson continued, "I can scarcely bring my pencil to write it, but these inhuman fiends, these vaunted brave Berdan sharp shooters, murdered these poor fellows also." Donaldson immediately ordered the four Sharpshooters to seek trouble elsewhere, as "their presence was distasteful." Indeed, it took a different kind of soldier to serve as a U. S. Sharpshooter.¹⁰

However, the 1st U. S. Sharpshooters faced significant problems during their first year of service, largely stemming from the cowardice and ineptitude of Colonel Berdan. Put simply, Berdan lacked both the steady mind of a military tactician and the physical courage necessary to face the enemy. More than once, he fled the field at the outset of an engagement, afterwards providing suspicious or even ridiculous excuses to explain his absence. Two courts-martial failed to remove him of command on charges of cowardice and misconduct, and by autumn 1863, unable to cope with the dread of combat, Berdan took an unauthorized leave of absence, never to return to command. Although Berdan's cowardice led to some severe criticism, the 1st U. S. Sharpshooters, under the direction of their line officers, persevered, becoming one of the Army of the Potomac's most trusted regiments.

Due to its later deployment, the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters initially avoided Berdan's atrocious leadership. Instead, it followed the direction of Colonel Henry A. Von Post, receiving an assignment to the 1st Army Corps in 1862. By 1863, the men of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters marched to Gettysburg as veterans of eight major engagements. Furthermore, they were a tight unit, dedicated to their professionalism and to each other. Their frequent deployment as skirmishers and long-range marksmen, rather than alienating the soldiers from each other, strengthened both individual sharpshooters' leadership abilities and their collective confidence in their regimental organization. Sergeant Darius Starr of Company F perhaps expressed it best in a letter to a friend written on September 8, 1863. Starr wrote, "We have in this regt a set of men who do not look up to anybody, and in fact most of the boys are fit to take command of a regiment, and they all know they are a more intelligent set of men than the officers of most regiments. Even in battle our boys do pretty much as they please." Sergeant Starr then quoted his brigade commander, Brigadier General Ward, whom he heard to say, "The 2nd U. S. S. S. is the best marching and the best fighting regt I ever saw, but they are so saucy that no one can do anything with them." Finally, Starr added a most telling remark: "I had rather be a private in this regiment than an officer in any other in the service."¹¹

Still, on the march to Gettysburg, the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters stood out as a demoralized set of men. Despite all their successful efforts on the battlefield, the Army of the Potomac had yet to win a major victory. Two months earlier, during the Battle of Chancellorsville, the two U. S. Sharpshooter regiments had performed an amazing feat, single-handedly capturing a 350-man regiment, the 23rd Georgia Infantry. However, the Army of the Potomac's disastrous rout on May 2 eclipsed this well-earned glory. The Army's consequent retreat across the Rapidan River and the hard-marched campaign into Pennsylvania in June suggested to the Sharpshooters that the war in the East was nearly lost.

Yet, none of this defeatism sapped the Sharpshooters' desire for combat, nor any of their sick humor. During the afternoon of July 1, as the Union 3rd Army Corps—to which the men of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters now belonged—trudged northward on the Emmitsburg road, the grizzled riflemen encountered numerous civilians—Gettysburg residents fleeing southward into Maryland—who regaled them with tales of the first day's fighting. When the anxious Sharpshooters asked about the battle, one "wildly excited" woman declared, "Yes, they are fighting terribly up there. There's two men killed in our back pasture." Having seen more than two dead soldiers before, the Sharpshooters laughed hysterically at this answer. For the rest of the war, they made this line a running gag on all their marches: "Is there fighting up ahead?" someone might ask. "Yes," replied the Sharpshooters, "There's two men killed in that pasture."¹²

However, this rough march led to one unexpected outburst. Just as the foot-sore Sharpshooters crossed the state line into Pennsylvania, they noticed that the roads became unacceptably rough and muddy. A cheerful Pennsylvania citizen welcomed the green-coated riflemen to the Keystone State. Upon hearing this, Sergeant Henry L. Richards of Company F, a thirty-nine-year-old school teacher from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, snarled, "God Damn your Pennsylvania [!] The Rebels ought to destroy the whole state if you can't afford better roads. This road is worse than Virginia Roads." Richards was a civic activist

widely known for his tree-planting projects in Portsmouth. A fellow citizen recalled that “his modesty and disposition were as conspicuous as his kindness.” His fellow soldiers considered him a courageous man. He had been wounded in the leg during the Battle of Antietam, returned to fight again at Chancellorsville, and, all the while, he modestly refused to accept an officer’s commission. Thus, to Private Wyman White, also of Company F, Richards’ eruption struck him as unusual. White recalled, “Such an outburst from our beloved Sergeant was something very strange indeed. But the forced march over this rough road in the terribly hot sun of that July day was his last march. His losing his temper and speaking out his feelings was a bad omen.”¹³

By dusk, the 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters joined the rest of the Army of the Potomac at the southern outskirts of Gettysburg. On the morning of July 2, the 169 men of the regiment awoke from a much-welcomed sleep by a five o’clock reveille. The men of the 3rd Army Corps—10,000 officers and men strong—held the southern end of Cemetery Ridge, anchoring the Army of the Potomac’s left flank. Although the 3rd Corps’ commander, Major General Daniel Edgar Sickles, received specific instructions from his superior, Major General George Gordon Meade, to extend the Army of the Potomac’s line south from Cemetery Ridge, Sickles elected to advance his men toward the open ridge along the Emmitsburg road, 1,500 yards ahead of his assigned position. Sickles feared the consequences if Confederate forces seized the Joseph Sherfy peach orchard, a small cluster of trees standing in his immediate front. If Confederate artillery took position there, it might threaten his section of the line. Thus, contrary to Meade’s directives, Sickles recklessly redeployed his corps along the Emmitsburg road, nearly one mile in advance of its assigned position.

Actually, Sickles and Meade debated the defensive position of the 3rd Corps all morning, albeit never face to face. But Sickles used the time to reconnoiter the ground in front of him in preparation for his advance. Sickles selected Colonel Berdan’s two Sharpshooter regiments for this task. At 7:30 A.M., Berdan received instructions to feel the enemy’s position with six companies of the 1st U. S. Sharpshooters—Companies A, B, C, G, H, and K—approximately 200 officers and men. These Sharpshooters held a skirmish line extending nearly one-half mile between the Sherfy peach orchard and the Peter Rogers farm. Then, at 10:30 A.M., Berdan received another order from Major General Sickles, delivered through his division commander, Major General David Bell Birney, to advance a reconnaissance force of 100 U. S. Sharpshooters, consisting of Companies D, E, F, and I, another quarter mile beyond the Emmitsburg road towards Pitzer’s Woods, a thick tree-lot at the southern terminus of Seminary Ridge. At noon, Berdan’s reconnaissance force, supported by 200 men from the 3rd Maine Infantry, bumped into a 1,500-man Alabama Brigade under Brigadier General Cadmus Wilcox. The short twenty-minute firefight that resulted cost the 1st U. S. Sharpshooters only nineteen men, while they, in turn, inflicted anywhere between fifty and 100 casualties upon their opponents. However, news of this skirmish prompted Sickles to commit his entire corps to the Emmitsburg road position. Shortly after 2 P. M., he rolled his line forward.

While the riflemen of the 1st U. S. Sharpshooters “kicked up the muss” at Pitzer’s Woods, their colleagues in the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters sat patiently at the foot of a steep rocky hill called Little Round Top. Major Homer R. Stoughton from West Randolph, Vermont, a twenty-nine-year-old railroad engineer, commanded the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters. Stoughton had raised Company E during the



Major Homer Stoughton. GNMP

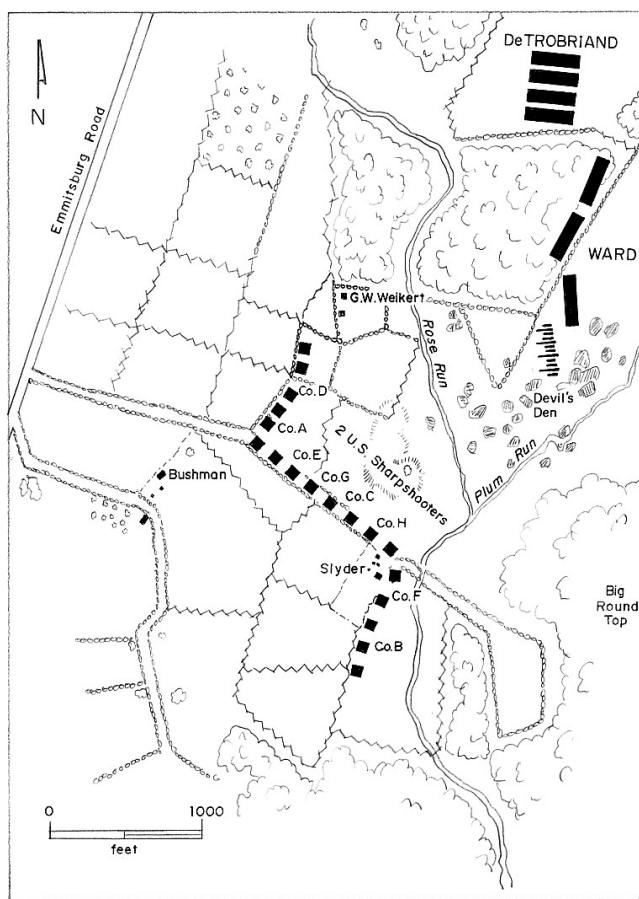
autumn of 1861 and excelled as a line officer. Although Private Wyman White of Company F asserted that Stoughton never went into a fight “without an edge on” (nineteenth-century slang for being inebriated), Stoughton received high praise from his soldiers for his coolness and bravery.¹⁴

Sometime during the morning of July 2, Stoughton received orders from his brigade commander, Brigadier General Ward, instructing him to cover a ravine—today known as the “Valley of Death”—at the northwestern base of “Sugar Loaf Hill,” the name that Union soldiers gave Big Round Top. Stoughton placed Captain Albert Buxton’s Company H upon the brow of the hill with vedettes overlooking the ravine, probably on Big Round Top’s northwestern face. He placed his largest company, D, twenty-seven men strong, under command of Captain Jacob McClure, “in the ravine near the woods.” This position was the southern aperture of the “Valley of Death” between Devil’s Den and the western foot of Big Round Top. Companies B and F, under Captain Adolphus A. Guest and Second Lieutenant Samuel F. Murry,

held a position in reserve with the regimental colors, most likely in the marshy area east of Houck’s Ridge. The remaining four companies—Companies A, E, G, and C—held a position that ran “perpendicular to the cross-road that intersects with the Emmitsburg pike.” Undoubtedly, this was the Wheatfield road. These four companies formed a line facing west, running across the road at the north end of Houck’s Ridge.¹⁵

Little action occurred while the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters remained in this position. Some men, like First Lieutenant William P. Shreve, the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters’ former quartermaster, and at that time, the brigade quartermaster, used this lull to visit with his friends, the field officers of the 124th New York Infantry: Colonel Augustus Van Horne Ellis, Lieutenant Colonel Francis M.

Cummings, and Major James Cromwell. Ellis and Shreve smoked their pipes together, exchanging “usual compliments.” After several hours, Shreve heard the order for the Sharpshooters to “fall in.” He jumped on his horse, giving “such salutation perhaps as one might have done on an ordinary occasion.” Ellis called back, “Take care of yourself, my boy.” By the end of the day, Ellis and Cromwell would both be dead and Cummings severely wounded. Shreve remembered that these were the last words he ever spoke to these men, and the incident “impressed itself deeply



The 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters cover the left flank of the 3rd Corps.

on my memory.”¹⁶

At 2 P.M., minutes after Major General Sickles made his decision to commit his corps to a new forward line, Major Stoughton received orders from Brigadier General Ward. His brigade commander now instructed him to “advance his command as skirmishers across the field in front . . . for half a mile and await further orders.” Riding toward the two companies he posted at the southern end of the “Valley of Death,” Companies D and H, Stoughton observed a second crossroads about 200 yards ahead of his vedette screen’s right-front. This was the John Snyder farm lane. Bordered by high stone walls on either side, this lane ran west from the western foot of Big Round Top—where the farm sat—six hundred yards

to an intersection with the Emmitsburg road at the top of Warfield Ridge, a slightly wooded acclivity that ran northwest-southeast almost perpendicular to the left flank of Sickles' newly advanced front. If Confederate soldiers appeared on this ridge, they could easily sweep up the 3rd Corps' left flank by moving northeast, up the Emmitsburg road. The 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' task, then, was to protect this exposed left flank with a line of skirmishers, denying the Confederates access to the Slyder farm lane, a trail that ultimately led to Big Round Top, an eminence that stood almost in the rear of the 3rd Corps' exposed position.¹⁷

Stoughton began his redeployment maneuver by first approaching Captain McClure's Company D. He brought this company southwest, splashing them across Rose Run, and placing them upon the north side of the Slyder farm lane, perpendicular to it, perhaps two hundred yards east of the crest of Warfield Ridge. Stoughton meant for Company D to serve as the anchor company in a complex maneuver whereby the rest of the regiment, lined up on Company D's left, swept southwest over the northwestern shoulder of Big Round Top in one colossal right-wheel motion. As Private Wyman White recalled, "we . . . deployed as skirmishers facing back [south] towards Emmitsburg. . . . We were kept in line all the forenoon and advanced slowly towards the south. The left of our line was at the foot of Little Round Top, and, as we advanced towards the south, the left of our line just brushed the foot of Round Top proper."¹⁸

This maneuver took nearly an hour and a half to perform. Undoubtedly, the movement tested the Sharpshooters' discipline, because the area southwest of Little Round Top and Devil's Den was studded with enormous boulders and mired by a swampy creek known as Plum Run. For the two companies on the extreme left of the Sharpshooters' line, Companies B and F, the movement took them through thick woods and over the steep northwestern face of Big Round Top. To perform this wheeling maneuver with a dispersed skirmish line required professionalism, experience, and training. Each Sharpshooter had to maintain proper intervals with his file partners and cell-mates while changing direction inside this

confusing terrain.

As awkward as this maneuver must have been, it accomplished two important purposes. First, it made certain to Major Stoughton that the area southwest of Little Round Top and Devil's Den was completely swept of enemy troops. Although they encountered no resistance, once Stoughton deployed his men on the Slyder lane, he assured himself that he left no enemy soldiers behind his position. Second, Stoughton's maneuver offered his Sharpshooters a chance to



Men of Company F, 2nd U.S.S.S. Richard Woodbury Collection, USAMHI

walk this terrain for themselves. If Confederate forces pressed them out of their position at the Slyder lane, they could fall back over ground that they had already traversed. Knowledge of the terrain would prove an asset in the coming battle.

Shortly before 3:30 P. M., the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters completed their complex right-wheel maneuver. Company D held the extreme right of the line, forming behind a stone wall that ran north from the Slyder lane, connecting with the southwest corner of Rose Woods. Upon Company D's left stood Minnesota's Company A, numbering approximately twenty-five officers and men. This company sat at the juncture of

Company D's protective stone wall and the Slyder lane. Together, Companies D and A constituted the Sharpshooters' right flank. Companies E, G, C, and H, numbering approximately sixty-five men altogether, extended the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' skirmish line farther to the left. These men, however, took shelter inside the lane itself. Unlike Companies D and A, their line did not run north-south, but nearly east-west. Generally, the men in these companies trained their rifles to the southwest, where they could see the crest of Warfield Ridge about 300 to 400 yards distant. The last two companies, F and B, each numbering twenty-five officers and men, held the extreme left of the line. Company F occupied the Slyder farm proper, its right flank connecting with the left flank of Company H, which stood inside the Slyder lane near the house. The walls and fences surrounding the Slyder farm on the south side of the lane ran north-south, so the juncture of Companies H and F formed a concave angle. Company B, with the attached color guard, extended Company F's line farther south, using the stone walls and boulders at the western edge of Big Round Top for cover. Thus, Major Stoughton's skirmish line stretched about 900 yards. His line was shaped like a lighting bolt, with a convex angle at its north end and a concave angle at its south end. Any effort intended by Confederate troops to sweep up the Union left flank stood little chance of avoiding his skirmishers.¹⁹

To ensure that he would not be surprised, Stoughton sent ahead a small team of Sharpshooters to scout the top of Warfield Ridge and alert him if any Confederate troops arrived. This team consisted of fifteen men picked from the two Vermont companies, E and H, led by Sergeant Henry Scribner of Company H and Corporal Henry C. Congdon of Company E. Two commissioned officers accompanied this forward observation squad, First Lieutenant Seymour Norton, the 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters' adjutant, and Captain John M. Cooney, an aide for Brigadier General Ward.

Among those selected for this assignment was sixteen-year-old Charles Fairbanks of Company E. Fairbanks recalled that this reconnaissance force was necessary to "draw the enemy's fire and reveal their whereabouts, as nothing could be seen of them in our front." Unfortunately, the scouting mission occurred at an ill time. The squad proceeded up the eastern face of Warfield Ridge at the exact moment that Confederate Major General John Bell Hood's 7,300-man division ascended the ridge's western face. The fifteen Sharpshooters reached the top of the ridge first, where, according to Fairbanks, they beheld the awe-inspiring sight of "three lines of battle . . . in our front." Fairbanks recalled that the Confederates "appeared in our front and left flank so rapidly that all of us that had been detailed were captured." In reality, the advance skirmishers of Hood's division gobbled up five of the fifteen sharpshooters: Corporal Henry Congdon, Private Charles Fairbanks, Private Ledrue M. Rollins, Private Ira Carr (all of Company E), and Private George W. Diamond of Company H. The rest of the reconnaissance team predictably scattered, racing back down the ridge toward the Slyder lane and the safety of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' skirmish line.²⁰

At this moment, Stoughton rode north along the right of his line, trying to find a way to connect his right flank with the rest of the 3rd Corps. Ward had told him that skirmishers from the main line of battle posted back on Houck's Ridge would deploy additional skirmishers—one company from the 99th Pennsylvania Infantry and one company from the 20th Indiana Infantry—and eventually connect to Company D. However, neither of these two companies came as far out as Company D. Several Companies from the 5th Michigan Infantry in Colonel Regis De Trobriand's brigade posted near the George Rose wheatfield also sent out skirmishers, but again, these did not move out far enough to connect with the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' right flank. Thus, as Stoughton wrote in his after-action report, with Confederates arriving in large numbers in his front, "In this position we had but little time to wait."²¹

As the Sharpshooters from Minnesota's Company A moved into position, Second Lieutenant Dyer Burgess Pettijohn and Private Edwin Aldritt double-quickened along the two sides of the Slyder lane, Pettijohn along the north wall and Aldritt along the south wall. According to Aldritt, Pettijohn "could scout like an Indian and so could I. I never moved more than ten feet without scanning the ground and I also was laying out a safe route for my retreat." As Aldritt and Pettijohn came out of the woods southwest of Devil's Den, they saw a small house, probably the Slyder house, with a woman, Catherine Slyder, calmly sitting on the front porch. Suddenly, a small boy, probably nine-year-old Isaiah Slyder, came running across the clearing west of the house. "Mama, mama!" he cried, pointing to the wood-lot on the

top of the ridge, “the woods back there is filled with men in gray. It’s just thick with them and they have cannon too.” Mrs. Snyder, who had generously offered provisions to the men of Brigadier General George Sears Greene’s brigade when they stopped at her farm the previous day, scoffed at her child. “You’re mistaken,” she said, “for the Union troops went here yesterday and there aren’t any rebels around.” Isaiah protested, “Yes there are.” Aldritt did not wait any longer. He ran up the lane until he saw another house, the Michael Bushman farm with a distinctive stone smokehouse, sitting on the side of the ridge. But, not more than fifty yards away, Aldritt saw a Confederate skirmish line, and beyond that, a line of Confederate infantry. The Snyder boy was right; the Confederates had finally come.²²

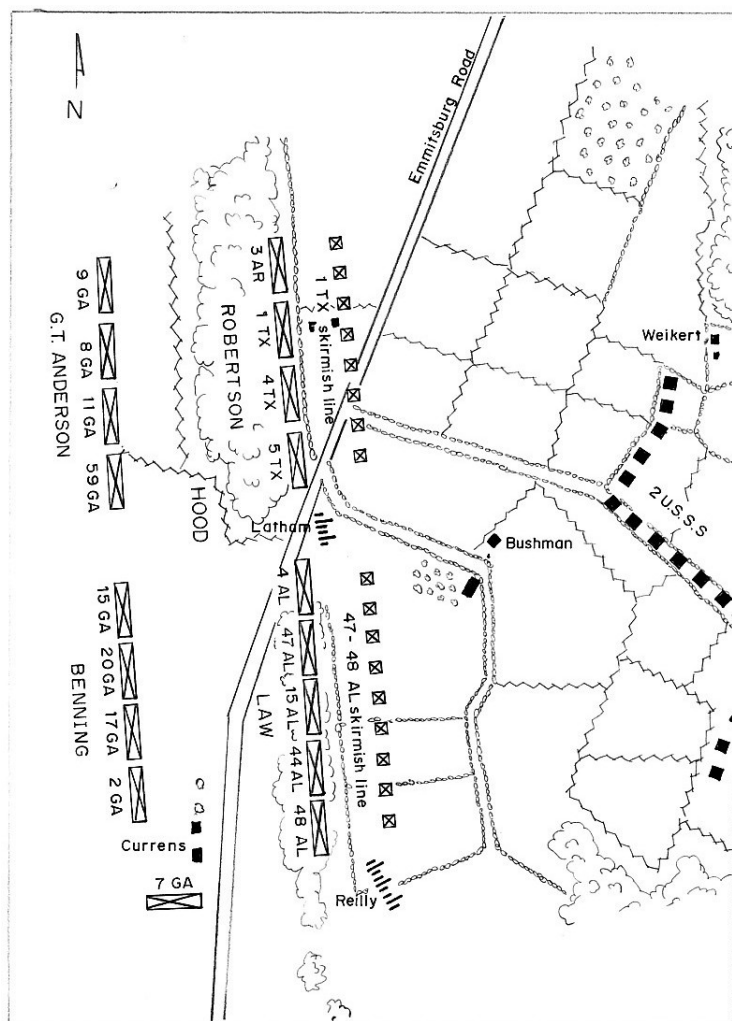
For the Confederate soldiers in Major General John Bell Hood’s division, the sight of the Sharpshooters’ skirmish line came as a bit of a surprise. According to scouting reports conducted earlier in the day, Union troops were not supposed to occupy the area south of the Wheatfield road. General Robert E. Lee’s attack plan for July 2 required Major General Hood to turn his division up the Emmitsburg road and drive the Union left towards Cemetery Hill. Now, with a large portion of Sickles’ corps south of the Wheatfield road, such a plan proved difficult.

Hood immediately ordered his troops to lie down, as Union artillery deployed at the Sherfy peach orchard and Devil’s Den had begun to open fire. Hood sent word to his corps commander, Lieutenant General James Longstreet, requesting permission to digress from his current instructions. Meanwhile, the five Vermont Sharpshooters captured by his division’s arrival were presented to one of Hood’s brigade commanders, Brigadier General Evander McIvor Law, a Citadel-trained military-school instructor who once served as a state senator in Alabama. Law’s Alabama Brigade, numbering 1,933 officers and men, held the extreme right of Hood’s front line. It connected on its left to Brigadier General Jerome Robertson’s Texas and Arkansas Brigade, numbering 1,734 officers and men, and was supported by Brigadier General Henry Lewis Benning’s 1,420-man Georgia Brigade, which stood four hundred yards to its rear. Because of his crucial position on the extreme right flank of the Confederate army, Law remained principally concerned about the impassibility of the terrain in his front and the possibility of Union troops being positioned south of Little Round Top. If his brigade pivoted to the northeast, up the Emmitsburg road as directed, any Union soldiers south of Little Round Top would be placed in his immediate rear. Thus, he in particular had good reason to interrogate these captured Sharpshooters at his first opportunity.

Law questioned the five Sharpshooters, asking them why they were so far from their lines. In a postwar account of the event, Law incorrectly identified the Sharpshooters as stragglers, for they claimed to have surgeon’s certificates allowing them passage to the rear. According to Law, they told him that they came from “insecurely guarded” medical trains stationed behind Big Round Top. Additionally, they informed him that a farm road connected the Emmitsburg road to the east side of Big Round Top. Law also claimed that the prisoners gave him information pertaining to the relative weakness of the Union left flank, telling him that Big Round Top remained entirely unoccupied. However, little of this could have been true. Certainly, the captured Sharpshooters possessed some knowledge of the terrain, but there seems little possibility that these five enlisted men retained a firm grasp of the Union left’s deployment after they had left it nearly an hour and a half earlier. It is possible that Law might have fabricated part of this story to justify his belief that a direct attack against the Union left would fail. In his post-war account, Law maintained that it was more prudent for Hood’s division to cut loose and march around to the Union rear. The Sharpshooters’ information seemed to support such a move. However, if Law squeezed any information from the captured Sharpshooters, it could only have been garbled or intentionally misleading. According to Private Charles Fairbanks, one of the captured Sharpshooters, “They did not get much reliable information [from us], as we were all ‘yankees’ and knew how to deceive our enemy, which we did.”²³

Undoubtedly, this interrogation had to have left Law somewhat perplexed. If the captured Sharpshooters told him that he was in rear of the ungarded left flank of the Union line, then why was a line of skirmishers in his front? Whatever the case, Law decided that a change of plans was necessary; the possibility for a successful attack by maneuvering the division further to the southeast—around Big Round Top—was too tempting to ignore. Sickles’ redeployment turned an attack up the Emmitsburg road

into a frontal assault, rendering success uncertain. Even if an assault succeeded, Law argued, too many troops would be lost in the fight. Hood's troops might be better employed by swinging further around the Union left, seizing Big and Little Round Tops in the process. Law conferred briefly with Hood to debate the wisdom of a flanking maneuver, and they both elected to send a squad of six scouts to locate a route around the Union left.²⁴



3 P.M. Deployment of Hood's division on the Sharpshooters front.

Meanwhile, Sickles' artillery continued to pummel the Confederate line as it lay exposed on the open ridge. Brigadier General Robertson's Texas and Arkansas Brigade, situated closest to the Emmitsburg road with little tree cover, suffered the most from this bombardment. Artillery rounds ripped through the Texas units with incredible fury. One round sheared off the head of Private John Floyd, a San Antonio resident in the 4th Texas Infantry. In a letter written to his four-year-old son, Stark, Private John C. West of Company E, 4th Texas Infantry, wrote, "We were standing in an open field, under the shot and shell of these batteries, for half an hour, and a good many soldiers were killed all around me. One poor fellow had his head knocked off in a few feet of me, and I felt all the time as if I would never see you and little sister again." West recalled in a letter to his wife that "the infernal machines came tearing and whirring through the ranks with a most demoralizing tendency."²⁵ Private William C. Ward of Company G, 4th Alabama Infantry, remembered seeing three men killed by a single shell in the adjacent 5th Texas Infantry after the federal artillery had fired only three shots.²⁶ For these soldiers, the half-hour delay must have been excruciating. Their fellow soldiers lay dying, while they were

lying out in the afternoon sun, and yet no forward movement seemed forthcoming.

Much of the delay was caused by Major General Hood. According to his memoirs, he protested the plan to attack up the Emmitsburg road no less than three times.²⁷ Obviously waiting for his scouts to return with some information regarding the unknown terrain south of Big Round Top, he delayed the attack as long as he could, perhaps hoping that his superior, Lieutenant General Longstreet, might prove more flexible as the afternoon wore on. However, that half hour did not change Longstreet's decision to stick with the original attack plan. Hood had to move forward, turning up the Emmitsburg road as directed by General Lee. Once Hood's men became engaged, the other assaulting division under Major General Lafayette McLaws would attack Sickles' line from the west and relieve the pressure on Hood's men. To Hood, it seemed like a grim order, but, nevertheless, he accepted it.

Thus, a little after 4 P.M., Hood took his place at the center of his division, and, as Private John West of the 4th Texas remembered, “with a voice that Stentor might have envied,” he gave the command, “Forward—steady!—Forward!”²⁸ The men in his division shed their blankets and knapsacks, and sprang to their feet, remembered Private William Ward of the 4th Alabama, “as if at a game of ball.” Although Ward, like most of his comrades, eagerly desired to move out from under the artillery barrage, he wished he could have more time to stay off his feet. His brigade had marched all night to get to the battlefield and then made a five-mile flank march to reach Warfield Ridge. “O God, just for a half hour’s rest!” he lamented. But he heard the unmistakable orders. His brigade stood at attention, put their rifles at “right-shoulder-shift,” and then moved down the eastern slope of the ridge. As Ward recalled, “then arose a wild indescribable battle yell that no one having heard ever forgot.”²⁹ Hood’s men were certainly not dispirited by their experience weathering the storm of Union artillery, but facing the crack shots of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters would be an altogether different matter.

During the half hour that Law, Hood, and Longstreet debated the merits of attacking the Union left, the Sharpshooters braced for the Confederate onslaught. Stoughton noticed a Confederate artillery battery, Captain James Reilly’s Rowan Artillery, deployed at the top of Warfield Ridge at the extreme right of Hood’s line. Stoughton ordered some of his men to move under the cover of the woods on his extreme left and open fire on them. This squad successfully completed its assignment and “silenced one piece nearest us.”³⁰ Over in Company A, Private Edwin Aldritt watched a group of mounted Confederate officers as they consulted a map. Suddenly, Aldritt heard the report of a rifle, and then saw the man holding the map fall from his horse. Aldritt turned to his right to see that his file-mate, Second Lieutenant Dyer Pettijohn, had just fired what might have been the first shot of the engagement. Pettijohn was a twenty-nine-year-old violinist from Huntsville, Illinois, who “busted” during the Colorado Gold Rush of 1859. He was an excellent marksman, having learned to use a rifle on the Illinois prairie. He received his lieutenancy in May, just after the Battle of Chancellorsville, but his commission had not yet been signed. Thus, at Gettysburg, he still wore his first sergeant’s uniform and he still carried his Sharps Rifle. This probably suited him, as the young pioneer would have been reluctant to give up his rifle in such a dire situation. As his children later recalled, “nothing suited him better than to get into a scrap.”³¹

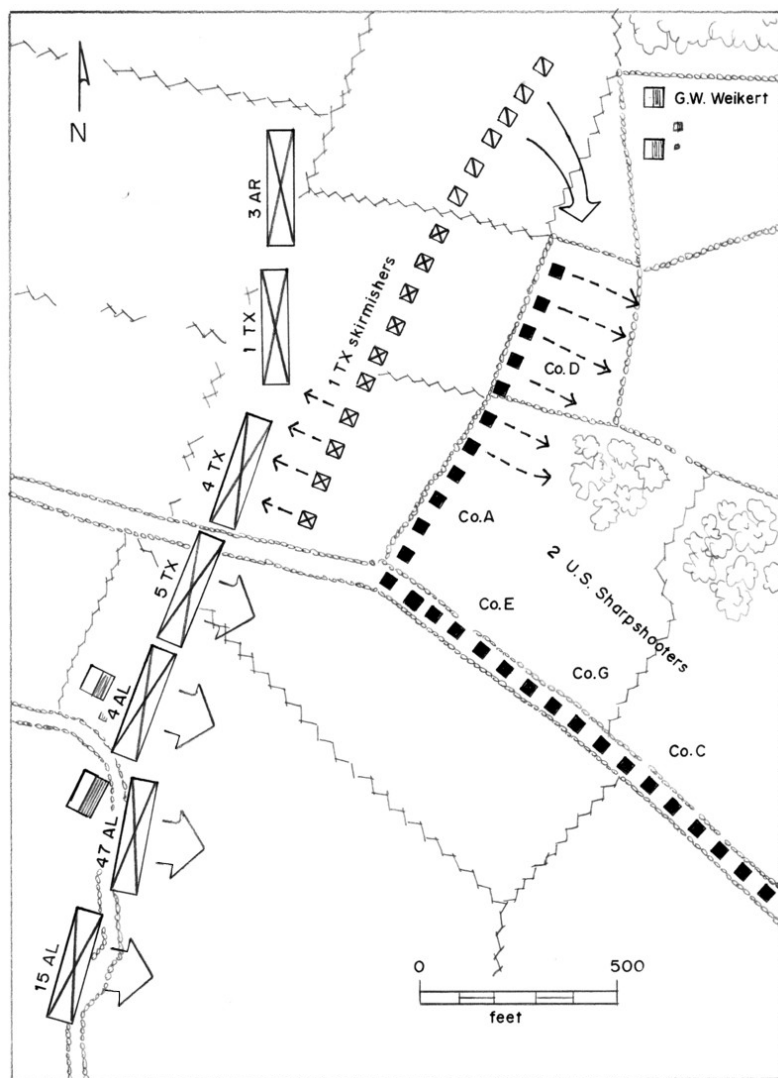
Four companies of skirmishers from the 1st Texas Infantry advanced upon the right of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters’ skirmish line, followed by the rest of Brigadier General Jerome Robertson’s brigade, pressing Companies D and A of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters. Aldritt and Pettijohn apparently advanced almost up to the Bushman farmyard where the Texas skirmishers opened a volley on them. Aldritt distinctly heard the sound of the lead smash up against the smokehouse, prompting him to turn “to run for my life.” In his words, Aldritt “dusted” for the stone wall that connected the Snyder lane to the George W. Weikert farm. There, he joined the rest of Companies D and A, and began firing into the oncoming skirmish line. According to Aldritt, the Sharpshooters’ accurate fire repelled the Texas skirmishers:

We sharpshooters were behind a stone wall and we made quick work of the skirmishers. They brought up a regiment but had no chance. They had come across a clearing of about 200 yards and we shot them to pieces. Their loss was terrible and they didn’t get half way before they broke and ran back for the woods.³²

As the Confederate skirmishers gave way, Major Stoughton rode up, instructing Aldritt to head back out and interrogate a wounded Texas skirmisher caught between the lines. Aldritt jumped over the wall, ran across the clearing, and offered a wounded Texan a swig from his canteen. “What regiment is that behind the wall?” asked the Texan. “We are the Second United States Sharpshooters,” replied Aldritt. “My God,” remarked the Texan, “I never saw such shooting.”³³

The Confederate infantry of Robertson’s brigade vowed not to be deterred by a mere skirmish line, so the four regiments in line of battle fixed bayonets and assaulted the wall. This dense line of infantry advancing across the open field gave the Sharpshooters ample opportunities to get in their deadly work. James O. Bradfield of Company E, 1st Texas Infantry, recalled, “The first man down was my right file man, William Langley, a noble, brave boy with a minié ball straight in the brain. I caught him as he fell

against me, and laid him down, dead. As I straightened up to move on, that same familiar ‘Spat’ which always means something, sounded near, and looking around, saw Bose Perry double over and catch his gun. He did not fall, however, but came on dragging his wounded leg and firing as he advanced, but it was getting too hot to pay attention to details.” Indeed, the Sharpshooters’ fire must have been accurate, for it broke up the cohesion of the Texans’ and Arkansans’ advance. According to Second Lieutenant Pettijohn, “the rebel line as it advanced was anything but straight, but it was rather a zigzag formation, but on they came.”³⁴



4:00 P.M. Law's and Robertson's brigades open Confederate attack.

The sudden rush of Robertson's Confederates on the Sharpshooters' position forced them to retreat from the stone wall. Company D fell back first since, according to the company's unit history, the Confederate line "covered the entire front and flank of the Sharpshooters." The extreme left of the 1st Texas skirmish line had not been repulsed during the initial attack. These skirmishers turned south and flanked Company D, forcing the Maine Sharpshooters to retire swiftly. According to Sergeant James Mero Matthews, the Confederate soldiers held their fire until they reached a cluster of woods 200 yards from Company D's right flank. This tree growth was probably the southern edge of the Rose Woods. The Confederate skirmishers obliqued "to our left," Matthews wrote in his diary, "which seem[ed] intended to out flank us."³⁵

The Texas skirmishers did outflank them. The failure of the other skirmish companies from Ward's brigade to connect with the Sharpshooters' right flank placed Company D in a dangerous situation, and the Maine Sharpshooters fell back precipitously. Unfortunately, many of them discovered that their ammunition was still soaked from the rainy

afternoon of June 30. Matthews wrote, "Our ammunition was poor and consequently we could not do as good service as we wished." Company D suffered heavily as they fell back. Captain Jacob McClure, Sergeant John E. Wade, Private John B. Allen, and Private James C. Bradbury all suffered wounds during the retreat. Additionally, Private Charles O. Wentworth of Rockland, Maine, "skedaddled," running for his life to the rear, not to rejoin the regiment for the rest of the Gettysburg campaign.³⁶

The sudden withdrawal of Company D left Minnesota's Company A in a tight spot. As Lieutenant Pettijohn described it, "While we were paying some attention, and not without effect, to the enemy troops in our immediate front and our left, another regiment of 'Johnnies' came up through a grove of timber on

our right until they were within easy pistol range before we discovered their presence.” When the Texas skirmishers poured from the Rose Woods into the Sharpshooters’ right flank, Pettijohn realized that his situation was hopeless. Initially, he bolted for the low ground east of the stone wall defended by his company. Once there, Pettijohn joined two of his fellow soldiers, Corporal Benjamin O. Hamblet and Private John O. Dolson. A Confederate officer commanding the skirmish line called for the three of them to halt, but Hamblet and Dolson failed to heed the request. As they ran eastward, toward Devil’s Den, the Confederate officer “ordered his men to fire[,] and a rattle of musketry was the response.” Both of Pettijohn’s comrades received wounds, Hamblet in the left thigh and Dolson in the left leg and lung. When soldiers from Colonel William McCandless’ Pennsylvania Reserve Brigade reoccupied this ground on July 3, they recovered Hamblet and Dolson. Both men lingered from the effects of their wounds for weeks. Surgeons amputated Hamblet’s leg, but he died on July 30. Dolson succumbed to the effects of his wounds in Camp Letterman Hospital on September 3.³⁷

Pettijohn concluded that “discretion was the better part of valor,” and surrendered to the Texas soldiers who, according to Pettijohn, were a “very sociable set of fellows, in fact entirely too much so for my good.” One Texan demanded that Pettijohn trade hats with him, and “no” would not be taken as an answer. An officer relieved Pettijohn of his wallet at the muzzle of a revolver, “after exhausting a vocabulary of abusive epithets on me, to which I was forced to submit with as much grace as possible under the circumstances.” When Pettijohn initially declined give up his cash and personal items to the Confederate officer, he noticed the angry Texan fingering the trigger of his pistol “a little carelessly.” Fearing an “accident,” Pettijohn concluded that “if life was worth living, it certainly was worth twenty dollars, the size of my pile,” and he quickly handed over his wallet. Along with another captured member of Company A, Private William E. Mason, Confederates led Pettijohn to the rear. During the Confederate retreat from Gettysburg, he remained under constant guard, either by the Virginians from Major General George Pickett’s division or by cavalry commanded by Brigadier General John Imboden. Eventually, Pettijohn reached Richmond, Virginia, where his captors placed him in Libby Prison along with countless other commissioned officers taken at Gettysburg.³⁸

Pettijohn’s file partner, Private Edwin Aldritt, managed to escape, fleeing back with the rest of Companies D and A toward Ward’s battle line on Houck’s Ridge. During their retreat, some of the men from Company D collided with skirmishers of the 4th Maine Infantry, the left-most regiment of Ward’s brigade. Company D’s skirmishers and the 4th Maine skirmishers fought a brief holding action against the men of the 1st Texas Infantry at the southern base of Houck’s Ridge, but, when the 44th and 48th Alabama infantries arrived to attack Devil’s Den from the south later in the day, the Confederates captured a number of these men, including four members of Company D: Corporal Argyl D. Morse, Corporal John H. Rounds, Corporal Richard C. Boynton, and Private Francis W. Ladd. This brought Company D’s casualty figures up to four wounded, four captured, and one missing, the highest number of any of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters’ eight companies.³⁹

The withdrawal of the two right companies signaled the withdrawal of the four center companies posted in the Snyder lane and the withdrawal of Major Stoughton himself. However, the withdrawal of these companies occurred in a more orderly fashion than the withdrawal of the right flank. Part of this had to do with the fact that the 1st Texas and 3rd Arkansas—the two regiments that overran Companies A and D—did not continue pushing southeast against the Sharpshooters’ skirmish line, for this was not their mission. Instead, these two regiments turned northeast to find the Union left. Robertson’s instructions demanded that he keep his brigade’s left flank on the Emmitsburg road. The Sharpshooters’ deadly fire had already forced him to abandon this road by more than 300 yards, and he decided that he could not deviate any further. Thus, he ordered his two left regiments to begin their turn northeast to get the attack moving in the correct direction. This decision split his brigade into two elements. Robertson’s two right regiments, the 4th and 5th Texas, could not follow this northeast movement and continue their connection with the left of Law’s brigade. Consequently, a gap opened between the 1st and 4th Texas that widened increasingly as the attack rolled on.⁴⁰

The splitting of the Texas brigade proved to be a decisive moment for the Confederate attack. Once the gap between the 1st and 4th Texas occurred, Major General Hood responded by redeploying his two right-

most regiments, the 44th and 48th Alabama infantries, moving them behind Law's brigade's line of battle and into the gap. This decision, in turn, affected the rest of the assault. Brigadier General Henry Benning had received orders from Hood to "follow Law's brigade at the distance of about 400 yards." Thus, when his brigade crested Warfield Ridge after the attack had already started, Benning saw Law's brigade moving in two different directions. He saw the 4th, 15th, and 47th Alabama infantries moving eastward—not at all in the planned direction of the attack—while the 44th and 48th Alabama infantries moved northeast. Benning wrote, "Our own first line . . . became visible advancing about 400 yards in our front. The part of it in our front I took to be Law's brigade." The body of troops he saw was indeed Law's brigade, but it was not the portion of Law's brigade he was supposed to follow. Benning led his brigade behind the 44th and 48th Alabama, arriving at Devil's Den sometime around 5:30 P. M. Benning's 1,420 men had traveled far off course, failing to support the right of Hood's front line as directed. Had Robertson's brigade not split, and had the 44th and 48th Alabama not been redeployed, Benning's men would have struck the Union line at Little Round Top and perhaps altered the course of the second day's battle.⁴¹

This problem could have been easily fixed had Major General Hood simply informed Benning about the sudden redeployment of the two Alabama regiments. However, Hood received a wound to his left arm from an enemy artillery fragment while directing his troops near the Bushman orchard. Hood's aides helped him off his horse and carried him from the field. Thus, Hood never delivered the crucial orders to Benning. Brigadier General Law could have also fixed the problem, since he was near enough to Benning to relay the orders and since, after Hood's wounding, he ascended to command of the division. Unfortunately, Law never did this. Further, it seems that Law had no idea that he was in command until long after the division had pushed the Sharpshooters out of the Snyder farm area. Initially, none of Hood's staff could locate him. As John Stevens of the 5th Texas remembered, "Gen. Law was too far away to the right, and we were now moving into battle virtually without a leader and wholly ignorant of where the enemy was. Had Hood not been wounded it would have been very different."⁴²

A second reason why the Sharpshooters in the Snyder lane did not withdraw as quickly as the right flank was due to their angled position. The Confederates in the center of Hood's line had further to go to reach the Sharpshooters' position, 400 to 500 yards as opposed to 300 yards. This greater distance required more time to cross the open field, allowing the Sharpshooters more time to aim. The withdrawal of the four center companies occurred at a leisurely pace, although the magnitude of the Confederate attack certainly tested many Sharpshooters' courage. Captain Harvard P. Smith, commander of the eighteen-man Company G, remembered, "My company, G, deployed as skirmishers, was almost directly in front of the charging column, but we didn't stay there, neither did we kill the whole of Hood's corps. We certainly made it interesting for some of the Johnnies. . . . The [Sharpshooters] fought that day when all the chances seemed to be against them."⁴³ When the men of the 4th and 5th Texas reached the stone wall that bordered the south edge of the Snyder lane, they discovered that their foes had vanished, having fallen back to other obstacles, firing as they went. Private John Stevens of the 5th Texas Infantry described the attack:

We moved into battle at a very lively step and in a short time we were in a full charge. There was a stone fence 500 or 600 yards in our front, behind which we expected to find the enemy. Onto it we rushed—no Yankees there. Then 400 or 500 yards further there is a rail fence, just in the edge of the timbers. We expect to find the enemy there. Onto it we move at a charge, but no Yankee there.⁴⁴

The four center companies—E, G, C, and H—suffered only a few casualties during their withdrawal from the lane: five wounded and two missing. Company H suffered the heaviest loss, losing its captain, Albert Buxton; its bugler, Henry H. Houghton; and one private, Daniel D. Barnes, all wounded. Most of the surviving men in these companies headed north up the "Valley of Death," some of them, including a portion of Company H, reached the crest of Little Round Top.⁴⁵

Of all the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' companies deployed on the afternoon of July 2, Companies B and F seemed to cause the most havoc for the Confederates. The concave angle formed by these companies with the center companies at the Snyder house created a horrendous crossfire for Law's men. Private Wyman White, the young machinist in Company F, knelt behind a high stone wall that connected the house to the barn. At 4 P.M., he saw a never-to-be-forgotten scene as Hood's Confederates crested Warfield Ridge. He recorded in his diary:

We did not have long to wait before a solid mass of rebels spilled over a ridge in our front across the Emmitsburg Pike, their left bearing down on the Peach Orchard. They came yelling and firing and struggling over fences and through timber. Just in front of where I was, the land was open and, as they were mostly dressed in butternut colored clothes they had the appearance of a plowed field being within closed mass formation until they got within good fighting distance to our line, when they broke into line of battle formation three lines deep. Our line being only a skirmish line, that means five paces between the men, we were obliged to fall back or be either killed or taken prisoner. The enemy force was at least ninety men to our one. Still they noticed that there was some opposition to their charge for we were armed with breech loaders and, as we took the matter coolly, many a brave Southron threw up his arms and fell. But on they came shouting and yelling their peculiar yell.⁴⁶

The Sharpshooters' bullets hissed at the enemy line with a frightening sound, plunging into the ranks of the 4th and 5th Texas and the 4th, 15th, and 47th Alabama. The Confederate soldiers recognized the distinctive sound of the bullets fired from the Sharps breechloaders. Rather than making the high-pitched whistle that muzzle-loading rifles were known for, Sharps Rifle projectiles made a buzzing or hissing noise that sounded not unlike the noise produced by an angry hornet or serpent. Appropriately, one Confederate officer called the Sharpshooters' position at the Snyder house "a perfect hornets' nest of sharpshooters."⁴⁷

The effect of the Sharpshooters' fire was more than noise. Men and officers dropped at every step, picked off by the deadly marksmen. Private William Ward of the 4th Alabama remembered:

Immediately to the right, Taylor Darwin, Orderly Sergeant of Company I, suddenly stopped, quivered, and sank to the earth dead, a ball having passed through his brain. There was R[ufus] Franks, of the same company, just returned from his home in Alabama, his new uniform bright in color, the envy of all his comrades, his gladsome face beaming as if his sweetheart's kiss had materialized on his lips, calling to his comrades, 'Come on, boys; come on! The Fifth Texas will get there before the Fourth! Come on boys; come on!' He shortly afterwards met a fatal shot. There was Billy Marshall, running neck and neck with this private soldier, each striving to be the first at the stone fence, behind which lay protected the Federal line of skirmishers, firing into the faces of the advancing Confederates.⁴⁸

Adjutant Robert T. Coles, operating as a file-closer behind the 4th Alabama, remembered the youthful Rufus Franks of Company I. Coles recalled that Franks "walked erect and rapidly to the rear, still grasping his rifle, with no apparent evidence whatever of being the least wounded." This was strange; wounded men, Coles noted, invariably dropped their weapons. As Franks brushed past, he remarked in a trembling voice, "Adjutant, a handful of men can't drive those Yankees from that place, can't you get Major Coleman to call them off before they are all killed?" Franks' pessimism shocked Coles, who imagined, "there goes a soldier whose heart is gone." Coles pleaded for Franks to return to the ranks, but the young private snapped back, "I am wounded." Coles wasted no more time with him. He did not know that Franks had been shot through the bowels by one of the Sharpshooters, and he would die soon in a field hospital.⁴⁹

Although the 4th Alabama and the 4th and 5th Texas all suffered acutely from the crossfire coming from the Slyder farm, the 15th and 47th Alabama infantries suffered the most confusion and coordination problems. The redeployment of the 44th and 48th Alabama unexpectedly made these two regiments the new right flank of Hood's division. The left end of the Sharpshooters' skirmish line well overlapped the right of the 15th Alabama. As the two Alabama regiments approached the Slyder farm, they began wheeling northward in accordance with the original attack plan. When they did this, they exposed their right flank to enfilading fire from Companies B and F of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters. The right-most regiment, the 499-man 15th Alabama, suffered awfully from this maneuver. Not only did the 15th Alabama's position on the extreme right place it closer to the Sharpshooters, but it also had the farthest distance to travel down Warfield Ridge with no cover. Private William C. Jordan of Company B, 15th Alabama, complained, "This valley had no undergrowth, had a few trees dotted about, [and] no rocks for protection."⁵⁰

The Sharpshooters delivered a volley into the 15th Alabama's right flank, probably fired by all the front rank file partners. Colonel William Calvin Oates, the 15th Alabama's twenty-nine-year-old commander, immediately recognized the danger, but before he could react, the Sharpshooters delivered another volley, probably from the rear rank file partners. This fire came with more accuracy. According to Oates, it killed "one or two men" and wounded many others, including the 15th Alabama's second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Feagin. This second volley prompted Oates to change his regiment's direction. The Sharpshooters "were concealed," Oates lamented in a post-war letter, "I could not know what force was there and I knew that it would not do to go and leave such a force, I knew not how large in my rear." Thus, even though he had received no orders, Oates "changed direction by wheeling to the right and advanced with the two regiments on Stoughton."⁵¹

As Oates pivoted his regiment to the right, facing the Sharpshooters' skirmish line directly, the 240-man 47th Alabama came with them. The 47th Alabama had lost its commander, Colonel James W. Jackson, to heat stroke only minutes before. The 47th Alabama's new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Bulger, simply followed Oates' lead, double-quicking his men in the same maneuver. In the heat of the moment, the right flank of the 47th Alabama collided with the left flank of the 15th Alabama, causing, as Oates described, "considerable confusion." The poorly executed maneuver caused tempers to flare. Sergeant William Holley of the 15th Alabama shouted to Oates: "Make Colonel Bulger take his damn concern out of our regiment!" It took a few moments for the officers to extricate the two regiments, but, as he withdrew from the field, Major Stoughton took the time to notice the confusion. He wrote, "While they [the enemy] were advancing, the Second Regiment did splendid execution, killing and wounding a great many. One regiment broke three times and rallied, before it would advance."⁵²

Oates faced the added dilemma of having to drive the Sharpshooters out with only his battle line. Unlike Robertson's Texas and Arkansas Brigade, Law's Alabama Brigade did not have a line of skirmishers screening its front. Before the advance, Law directed three companies from the 47th Alabama and two companies of the 48th Alabama to deploy in skirmish formation. Owing to confusion resulting from the sudden heat-related sickness of Colonel James Jackson, these companies either did not advance with Hood's division or maneuvered in the wrong direction. The reasons for the failure of these companies to screen Law's advance remains unclear, but whatever the case, their inaction deprived the Confederate assault of approximately 170 officers and men and placed added burdens on the line infantry of Law's brigade.⁵³

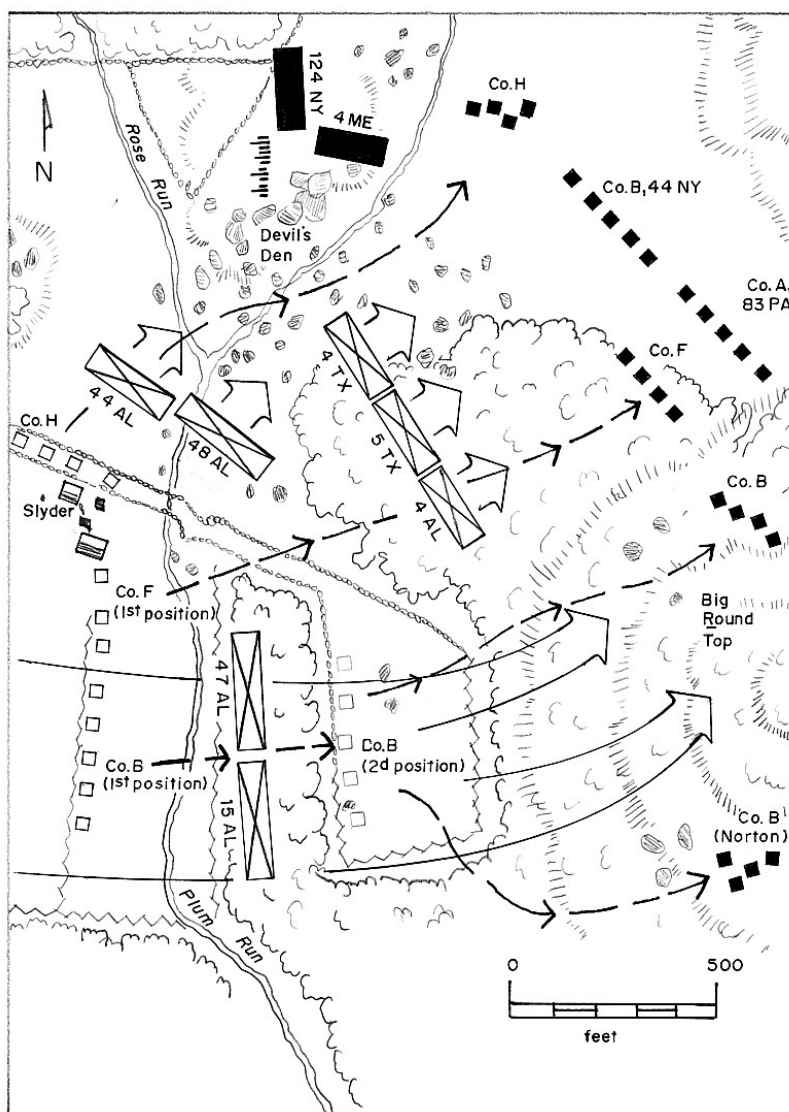
Nevertheless, the two Alabama regiments still numbered approximately 740 officers and men altogether. Thus, they easily pushed the two twenty-five-man Sharpshooter companies, B and F, out from behind their protective walls. But the Sharpshooters performed their withdrawal with precision. They splashed across Plum Run just east of the farm buildings and then began ascending the wooded, rocky southwestern face of Big Round Top. Private Wyman White described, "The country that my company fell back over was first low swampy intervals, then up over the western slope of the Big Round Top. . . . It was mostly wooded and large boulders and granite were thickly set in so they gave us splendid cover from which to oppose the enemy's advance."⁵⁴

The difficulty faced by the Confederates cannot be overstated. Nearly every gray-clad participant recalled the problems caused by the dense woods and enormous boulders. Private John C. West of the 4th Texas wrote that “courage and desperation was useless. There were places full ten or fifteen feet perpendicular around which we were compelled to go, and the entire ascent would have been difficult to a man completely divested of gun and accoutrements. It was a mass of rock and boulders amid which a mountain goat would have revelled.” Private John Stevens of the 5th Texas wrote similarly: “All through this timber the ground is covered with large boulders, from the size of a wash pot to that of a wagon bed, so to preserve anything like a line of battle is impossible.” Even Colonel James Jackson, the sun-struck commander of the 47th Alabama who did not participate in the entire attack, still realized the intense

struggle faced by his infantry. On July 7, he wrote to his wife, stating, "the slaughter commenced in earnest for we were in good range of their sharp shooters, but we could get no crack at them; from the fact that they were entrenched behind stone fences. We got in about a hundred yards of their first line and charged at it double-quick. The Yanks waited until we came in about forty or fifty paces & gave way and fled, making a stand behind every rock on the mountain which was as thick as they could be."⁵⁵

The ascent seemed unbearable for the Confederate soldiers. The ability to keep a disciplined line formation, normally a simple task for the crack veterans of Hood's division, became monumentally difficult. Additionally, they could not see their foe. Oates lamented that they could "only catch glimpses of men dodging from boulder to boulder." Yet, despite the fact that Oates and his fellow officers wanted to break off the engagement, the Sharpshooters kept "firing down just enough to draw me on." All the while, the Sharpshooters made the

Confederates pay for every step.
Even as the tired riflemen ran amid



4:30 P.M. The Confederate advance up Big Round Top.

the rugged terrain, they still took the time to deliver spectacular kills. Private John C. West of the 4th Texas recalled the death of Lieutenant Joseph Smith of his company. As the 4th Texas crossed Plum Run and began ascending Big Round Top, Smith dipped a handkerchief into the muddy run and tied it around his head. It did not take long for a Sharpshooter to draw a bead on this conspicuous piece of cloth. In a letter to his wife, West wrote, “He [Lieutenant Smith] was killed in twenty feet of me, just after we crossed the branch—shot through the head, the bullet passing through the folds of his handkerchief on both sides. He was a splendid officer and we miss him very much.”⁵⁶

Indeed, it was a murderous game. Private Wyman White of the Sharpshooters’ Company F, perhaps best described this cat-and-mouse-style combat in his diary:

But with all our advantage, our loss was considerable for the enemy kept up a terrible fire and we fell back no faster than we were obliged to, so when we skipped from one boulder to another the rebels had very good opportunity to get in their murderous work. An occasional lull in fire would be followed by a terrific volley and the bullets would snap on the rocks and spat on the trunks of the trees and glance off with a peculiar screech that a rifle or musket ball is famous for when it comes in contact with something hard.⁵⁷

During the fighting, Companies B and F of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters lost five men wounded, including Sergeant Henry L. Richards, the teacher from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, who uncharacteristically lost his temper the day before. Richards received a gunshot wound to his right leg, just below the knee. Unable to retreat with his comrades, he remained on the slopes of Big Round Top. Confederate soldiers carried him to a nearby field hospital—probably the Snyder farm—where they “treat[ed] him kindly,” bringing him food and water.⁵⁸

Captain Adolphus Guest’s twenty-five-man Company B presented Colonel Oates with the most difficult challenge. This small unit of Michigan riflemen darted up the southern face of Big Round Top, stood briefly behind the “d-shaped” stone walls of the Snyder family’s livestock pen on the shoulder of the hill, and then continued up to the craggy summit. Oates could do nothing but continue to pursue these men through this inhospitable area. Oates recalled:

I continued to advance straight up the southern face of Round Top. My men had to climb up, catching to the bushes and crawling over the immense boulders, in the face of an incessant fire of their enemy who kept falling back, taking shelter and firing down on us from behind rocks and crags that covered the mountain side thicker than gravestones in a city cemetery. My men could not see their foe, and did not fire, except as one was seen here and there, running back from one boulder to another.⁵⁹

Before the green-coated marksmen reached the top of the hill, Company B split into two squads. One squad, apparently commanded by a sergeant, circled clockwise around the craggy, cone-shaped summit of Big Round Top in a northeasterly direction. The other squad, with the regiment’s colors, directed by Adjutant Seymour Norton, circled counter-clockwise, heading to the eastern section of the hill. When Oates arrived at the summit, he discovered that the Sharpshooters had mysteriously vanished, “as though commanded by a magician.”⁶⁰

Oates halted his regiment on the summit of the hill, facing north, with his right flank resting at the hill’s highest point. The 47th Alabama remained attached to his left. Looking behind, Oates could see the track of his regiment’s advance marked by his own men who had fallen out of the ranks, either picked off by the Sharpshooters or collapsed from exhaustion. According to Colonel James Jackson of the 47th Alabama who watched the attack from the Snyder farm, men had fainted on the field “by hundreds.” Law’s brigade had marched over twenty-five miles throughout the night to reach their destination and had not yet had any rest. Consequently, Oates elected to hold his position. He earnestly wanted to give his men an opportunity to catch some rest and to wait for his canteen detail to link up with the regiment. Before the 15th Alabama stepped off from Warfield Ridge, Oates designated twenty-two men (two men from each of

his eleven companies) to take the regiment's canteens to a spring at the Andrew Currans farm on the Emmitsburg road and fill them.⁶¹

Five minutes after halting, Captain Leigh Terrell, a staff officer for Brigadier General Law, arrived at the summit, demanding that Oates get his men moving. Terrell informed Oates that Law now commanded the division and that the Union left stood in his immediate front. Oates protested, pleading for Terrell to allow his men more time to rest. Terrell insisted that Oates and Lieutenant Colonel Bulger of the 47th Alabama "lose no time." Dutifully, Oates complied, though, he wrote, "To move then was against my judgment."⁶²

This decision to move prevented the heat-stricken soldiers from the 15th Alabama from receiving their canteens. The canteen detail was only a few minutes behind the advance, but, after they ascended the hill, they found no Confederate soldiers. Instead, the twelve-man squad from Company B, 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters commanded by Adjutant Norton found them. Laden with canteens and unable to run, the detail surrendered. Citing this incident, Major Stoughton reported that "special mention should be made of this officer [Norton] for his coolness and bravery during this day's engagement."⁶³

Still, despite the enormous challenges faced by what remained of the Alabama and Texas soldiers, the opportunity to cause damage to the Union left remained quite viable. Five regiments—the 4th and 5th Texas and the 4th, 15th, and 47th Alabama—constituting a force no greater than 1,900 officers and men, descended Big Round Top with plans to—as Oates recalled—"drive the enemy before us as far as possible." It was now almost 5 P.M.⁶⁴

Having fought for nearly one hour, while traversing over a quarter-mile of rough ground, elements of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters still refused to give up the fight. Company F managed to keep its integrity, even as it descended into the valley between Big and Little Round Top. Led by the courageous Second Lieutenant Samuel Murry, an officer who defied regulations by carrying a Sharps Rifle, Company F kept its intervals while holding back the advance of the 4th and 47th Alabama infantries. The stubborn skirmishing of this company bought precious time for Union reinforcements to arrive on Little Round Top, bolstering the unprotected left flank of the Army of the Potomac. A 1,300-man brigade from the 5th Corps commanded by Colonel Strong Vincent had arrived on the southern face of Little Round Top only five minutes before the men of Company F emerged from the tree-line on Big Round Top's northern face.

Vincent's two center regiments, the 83rd Pennsylvania and the 44th New York infantries, each deployed a company of skirmishers to screen the infantrymen as they began fortifying their position on the hill. The skirmishers moved cautiously, intently listening to the loud popping of the Sharpshooters' rifles coming from the woods. Suddenly, the men of Company F emerged, firing vigorously at the still unseen enemy line. An officer in the 83rd Pennsylvania, perhaps Captain David P. Jones, the commander of the skirmish company, accosted Lieutenant Murry, accusing him of cowardice. The officer berated the Sharpshooters of Company F, shouting, "G—D— you, what are you afraid of? There ain't anything out there." According to Wyman White, "He called us cowards and using much profane language tried to drive us back into the face of the enemy." Before he concluded this "encouraging talk," the Confederate line emerged from the trees followed by a massive volley. As a storm of lead flew overhead, the "very fresh officer" leaped to safety behind some rocks. Lieutenant Murry calmly strode over to him and asked him to come back out and "drive back what he had pleased to call nothing just a minute before." White concluded in his diary that this Pennsylvania officer "looked and behaved as though he knew what a coward was by his own experience."⁶⁵

Despite the altercation between Murry and the 83rd Pennsylvania officer, the Sharpshooters cordially joined the ranks of the infantry regiment, fighting beside the Pennsylvanians for the next hour on the



Wyman White, Company F, 2nd U.S..S.S. Tom White Collection.

slope of Little Round Top. The Pennsylvanians and the New Hampshire Sharpshooters repulsed three successive charges until finally relieved sometime after 6 P.M. by Colonel Joseph Fisher's brigade of the 5th Corps. Private White remarked in his diary that the fighting on Little Round Top sounded like a "continuous fusillade," adding, "I think the breech loaders of the Sharpshooters was quite an item in the balance."⁶⁶

Meanwhile, the two squads of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' Company B continued to pester the right end of Law's brigade. The twelve-man squad led by the sergeant descended the northeastern face of Big Round Top, chased by the men of the 15th and 47th Alabama. This squad continued northeast, by-passing the southern spur of Little Round Top, and it stopped only when it reached a stone wall that bordered the west side of the Jacob Weikert farmyard. Moments later, these Sharpshooters were joined by Company B, 20th Maine Infantry, commanded by Captain Walter G. Morrill, who had been instructed by his regimental commander, Colonel Joshua L. Chamberlain, to secure the unit's left flank, guarding the saddle between the two hills. After Morrill's forty-five men descended Little Round Top, the Confederates began attacking Chamberlain's infantry line, cutting off their return. When Morrill encountered the twelve men of Company B, 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters, the sergeant in command asked to be placed under Morrill's direction. Morrill eagerly accepted. Together, the Mainers and Michigan Sharpshooters waited quietly behind the stone wall, the Alabamians ignoring them to attack the infantry line on Little Round Top.

The infantry fight lasted until almost 6:30 P.M., costing the 15th and 47th Alabama infantries dearly. Colonel Oates led his men in no less than five successive charges against the 20th Maine Infantry. As Oates contemplated his next move, two of his company commanders, Captain Blant Hill and Captain Frank Park, approached him, stating that Union forces were approaching his rear. The force they spotted was the twelve-man squad of Company B commanded by Adjutant Seymour Norton, with the regimental colors and Oates' captured canteen detail in tow. Guided by the sound of the firing, they approached to within 150 yards of the rear of Oates' line and began firing, "shooting my men in the back," Oates recalled. But Oates refused to consider retreat. He barked at Captain Hill and Captain Park: "Go back to your companies. We will sell out as dearly as possible!" This order only stood for only a moment, for a second source of rifle fire struck Oates' line from his immediate left. This fire came from Company B, 20th Maine Infantry, and its attached Sharpshooters, who now left the cover of the stone wall and joined the fight.⁶⁷

Oates' 15th Alabama Infantry stood at the center of three converging fields of small arms fire: one from Chamberlain's men, one from Morrill's men, and one from Norton's men. Oates marveled at the destructive effects of this crossfire. "While one man was shot in the face," he recalled, "his right hand or left hand comrade was shot in the side or back. Some were struck simultaneously by two or three balls from different directions." Oates reconsidered his previous decision and promptly ordered a retreat. His men needed no further encouragement and they ran away pell-mell, Oates admitted, "like a herd of wild cattle." At that moment, the remainder of the 20th Maine Infantry descended from the spur in a stunning bayonet charge, capturing dozens of prisoners as they went. The Sharpshooters from Norton's party collected a few prisoners too, including the commander of the 47th Alabama, Lieutenant Colonel Bulger, who had been wounded during the opening assault against the 20th Maine. Norton found Bulger sitting propped against a tree, wounded by a ball through the chest, "glad to surrender and be taken where he could receive surgical attention." Bulger surrendered his sword to Norton, who possessed it as late as 1883.⁶⁸

After two-and-one-half hours of combat, the fighting performed by the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters was over. Their performance at the Snyder farm, on Big Round Top, and on Little Round Top was a marvelous display of military talent for several reasons. First, elements of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters may have fought a longer continuous battle than any other regiment, Union or Confederate, on the southern end of field on July 2. Second, the men of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters fought within inhospitable terrain. The ground that they traversed contained marsh, steep hills, thick woods, and enormous boulders. Yet, the Sharpshooters fought within this terrain with relative ease. Third, and most astonishing, the Sharpshooters coolly engaged and delayed a force that outnumbered them by more than forty-two to one. The damage the Sharpshooters caused in terms of casualties inflicted on the enemy may never be known, but the

damage they caused to the cohesion and control of the Confederate attack proved considerable. The Sharpshooters broke up an enormous division-level attack, drawing Hood's division's constituent elements in various directions, dissipating the combat power of the assault. They also drew elements of the Confederate assault into the steep, rocky terrain of Big Round Top. This not only broke up the Confederate infantry lines, but it also exhausted the Confederate infantrymen who were forced to follow them.

Perhaps more than any other participant, Colonel William C. Oates of the 15th Alabama recognized the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' contribution to Union victory on July 2. Until his dying day, he believed that the green-coated riflemen had prevented him from capturing the key position at Little Round Top. Writing to Joshua Chamberlain in 1897, Oates maintained, "If Stoughton had not been where he was to lead me off up that mountain and had not gone right up the southern rugged face and right up over top of it, I would have found the Union left an hour earlier than I did and I would have taken Little Round Top which would have terminated the battle of Gettysburg. . . . They ought to erect the tallest monument on the field to Stoughton and his Sharpshooters for happening to be where they were."⁶⁹

Oates offered similar encomiums to Stoughton himself after the war. In a letter written in 1888, Oates told his former adversary:

The great service which you and your command did was, first, in changing my direction, and in drawing my regiment and the 47th Alabama away from the point of attack. You drew off and delayed this force of over 1,000 men from falling on the Union left at the same time of attack of Law's other three regiments, . . . and but for the service on your part I am confident that we would have swept away the union line and captured Little Round Top, which would have won the battle for us. . . . You and your command deserve a monument for turning the tide in favor of the Union cause.⁷⁰

At the end of his letter, Oates offered a whimsical literary analysis of the fight. He closed his letter to Stoughton with a cleverly appropriate quote by Victor Hugo, characterizing the relationship of the fighting at the Snyder farm and Big Round Top to the Battle of Gettysburg as a whole: "Two great armies in battle are like two giants in a wrestle; a stump, a projecting root, or a tuft of grass may serve to brace one or trip the other; on such slender threads does the fate of nations depend."⁷¹

The officers and men of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters would have agreed. As skirmishers and marksmen who regularly trained and held high esteem for professionalism and tactics, they understood the incredible importance held by the common infantry soldier. To the Sharpshooters, skirmishing and long-range sniping were not supplemental to the Army of the Potomac's greater battle. Instead, they believed that skirmishing and sharp-shooting tactics showcased the real killing power of an army by proving what a well-trained soldier could do. Dedicated to this breed of comradeship and professionalism, the U. S. Sharpshooters willingly placed themselves in the difficult positions as they did on July 2 time and time again until their disbanding in 1865.

The Sharpshooters' bravery came at a high price. The fighting on July 2 cost the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters thirty-one men: three mortally wounded, fourteen wounded, eleven captured, and three missing. The fighting over the next two days cost the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters another thirteen men, including four killed. In many ways, it could be argued that the losses of these men were more debilitating than losses in other infantry regiments, since expert riflemen could not be easily replaced. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the men who marched from Front Royal to Piedmont on July 23 who threatened Brigadier General Ward were in a sour mood. After having lost twenty-six percent of their unit at Gettysburg, the remaining Sharpshooters knew that their regiment would never be the same.

Among those sorely missed was the amiable Sergeant Richards of Company F. Shot through the knee during the retreat from the Snyder farm and briefly taken prisoner by the Confederates, Richards was eventually recovered by Union soldiers on July 4. His comrades took him to a field hospital where surgeons amputated his shattered leg. Surprisingly, Richards did not survive this routine medical procedure. During the pre-dawn hours of July 5, Richards died, apparently of an overdose of ether.

Private Wyman White, who had earlier noted Richards' uncharacteristic outburst during the march to Gettysburg, lamented his loss, for he considered him "a noble, patriotic, brave man, ever ready to do anything or undergo any hardship for his country."⁷²

On July 24, Joseph Foster, a friend from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, arrived in Gettysburg to claim Richards' body. On July 18, Richards' hometown newspaper, the *Portsmouth Journal*, mourned, "Now, and in all future time, as those who knew him well pass under the shade which is just beginning to be made by the long range of trees on Auburn Street, they will be reminded of the one who selected and with his own hand placed them there to cheer the passage to the cemetery—and the name of the noble Richards will be as green in their memory as the leaves which every returning spring will anew."⁷³

Back on the battlefield at Gettysburg, the surviving Sharpshooters did not characterize their sacrifices with so elegiac a tone. On July 5, amid a loud mid-night thunderstorm, using makeshift stretchers made of fence rails to carry the corpses, the men of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters buried their dead on the field. Private Wyman White, one of those who volunteered to carry the slain, described the harrowing experience:

It was a journey that I would not care to repeat and you can imagine our feelings as we were bearing the bodies of our dead comrades, often falling over the bodies of the slain, causing us to drop, to us, our sacred burdens. . . . When we got to the regiment, they had dug graves, not in moonbeams misty light and lanterns dimly burning, but in entire darkness. Their lonely beds were hallowed and in the darkness these soldiers buried their comrades' bodies as tenderly as their mothers could have done. Never was there a more weird funeral and burial ever done, for the time of the whole proceeding, there was a continuous shower and terrific thunder and lightning.⁷⁴

The burial gave the Sharpshooters pause for momentary reflection. More than anything, it seemed, in looking back on their experience on July 2, they were merely thankful to be alive. After the "funeral," Private White went to sleep amid the pouring rain. He wrote, "I managed to get three fence rails, all of them split three square as rails are, and placing them side by side with a piece of shelter tent on the rails and my rubber blanket over me, I was soon off to sleep and dreaming, very probably of home and the dear ones there. Sleep and dreams are boons above any price, even if your bed is the sharp edge of fence rails and the place of rest is among the dead on the battlefield."⁷⁵

Notes

¹ James Mero Matthews diary, 23 July 1863, in *Soldiers in Green: The Civil War Diaries of James Mero Matthews*, 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters, Peter Dalton, ed. (Sandy Point, ME: Richardson's Civil War Roundtable, 2002), 170-1.

² Wyman S. White, *The Civil War Diary of Wyman S. White, First Sergeant of Company F, 2nd United States Sharpshooter Regiment*, Russell C. White, ed. (Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 1991), 182-183. Sergeant James M. Matthews of Company D also recorded Ward's threat: "God damn your souls! I will give you hard tack! The first man that says hard tack I will put a ball through!" Dalton, 170-1.

³ White, 182-3.

⁴ For Berdan's biography see Roy Marcot, *Civil War Chief of Sharpshooters Hiram Berdan: Military Commander and Firearms Inventor* (Irvine, California: Northwood Heritage Press, 1989) and Wiley Sword, *Sharpshooter: Hiram Berdan, his Famous Sharpshooters and their Sharps Rifles* (Lincoln, RI: Andrew Mowbray Inc., 1988).

⁵ "One Hundred Sharp-Shooters Wanted!" *Portsmouth Herald*, 24 August 1861.

⁶ Charles Fairbanks, *Notes of Army and Prison Life 1862-1865*, Janet Hayward Burnham, ed. (Bethel, Vermont: My Little Jessie Press, 2004), 7, 11.

⁷ Edwin Aldritt quoted in Daniel J. Hoisington, *Chanhassen: A Centennial History* (Roseville, MN: Edinborough Press, 1996), 46.

⁸ Excerpts from Charles P. Mattocks' letter to mother, 27 March 1864, and diary, 20 April 1864, in Philip Racine, ed. "Unspoiled Heart": *The Journal of Charles Mattocks of the 17th Maine* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 111, 126.

⁹ Francis Adams Donaldson to brother, 21 April 1862, in J. Gregory Acken, ed. *Inside the Army of the Potomac: The Civil War Experience of Francis Adams Donaldson* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1998), 64-5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Darius Starr to brother, 8 September 1863, facsimile copy, author's collection.

¹² White, 162.

¹³ Ibid., 161-2; Arthur Ruitberg, "Portsmouth Honors Her Fallen Son," 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' Vertical File, Gettysburg National Military Park Library (GNMPL), Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

¹⁴ White, 136. According to the Sharpshooters' post-war historian, Charles A. Stevens, Stoughton and his Company, E, "were in it hot and heavy" at the Battle of Antietam. Stoughton's company lost eleven men during that engagement. In 1864, the non-commissioned officers and privates of the 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters purchased "a beautiful sword, belt, and sash" for Stoughton, inscribed with the names of all of Stoughton's engagements, "which bespoke more than words the feelings of the men who shot the rifles, towards their commanding officer." Charles A. Stevens, *Berdan's United States Sharpshooters in the Army of the Potomac, 1861-1865* (St. Paul, MN: Price-McGill Company, 1892; reprinted in Dayton, OH: Morningside Bookshop, 1984), 202, 539.

¹⁵ U. S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), Series 1, 27(1): 518-9 [Hereafter cited as *OR*].

¹⁶ William P. Shreve letter, facsimile copy, author's collection.

¹⁷ *OR*, Series 1, 27(1): 493.

¹⁸ White, 163.

¹⁹ The arrangement of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' companies at the Slyder lane is a matter of some debate. The arrangement that I have presented—(right to left): D, A, E, G, C, H, F, B—is the most plausible. This arrangement can be determined by the following evidence. First, Company D's unit history indicates that it held the extreme right flank. Second, two accounts from Company A soldiers—Private Edwin Aldritt and Lieutenant Dyer Pettijohn—place Company A near the Slyder lane within sight of the Bushman farm. Company A could only have been placed at the same stonewall defended by Company D, and since Lieutenant Pettijohn mentioned being out-flanked by Confederates emerging from woods on his right (the Rose Woods)—as also happened to Company D—it seems clear that these two companies stood next to each other. Third, the Vermont companies' unit history states that "Company H was posted near the Slyder House, behind a low stone wall topped with fence rails, which bordered the south side of the road, and company E was a short distance to its right." Thus, Company H stood in the Slyder lane at the house, with Company E also in the Slyder lane further to its right, although not necessarily to its *immediate* right. The two smallest companies, G and C, numbering 18 men and 17 men respectively, likely stood between Companies E and H. Companies A, E, G, and C had been formed together as a single battalion earlier in the day, and they fought as a single battalion on July 4 in that same arrangement from right to left. Thus, it seems unlikely that Stoughton would have changed their arrangement when he posted them at the Slyder lane. Fourth, Wyman White's diary indicates that his Company F also fought at the Slyder farm, although not inside the lane. Thus, Company F held a position to the immediate right of Company H. Finally, evidence proves that two Sharpshooter squads operated further to the left of Company F. One of these squads—with twelve men—joined Company B, 20th Maine Infantry, later in the day and another squad—also with twelve men—captured a water detail deployed by the 15th Alabama Infantry somewhere on Big Round Top. These two squads must have been parts of Company B, 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters. Company B's roster included 25 men on July 2, nicely suiting the numbers. Company B must have held the extreme left of the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters' skirmish line. See *Maine at Gettysburg: Report of Maine Commissioners prepared by the Executive Committee* (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Books, 1898), 349-350; William Y. W. Ripley, *Vermont Riflemen in the War for the Union, 1861 to 1865: A History of Company F, First United States Sharpshooters* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle and Company, 1883), 766; White, 164; *Michigan at Gettysburg: July 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, 1863* (1889, reprinted at Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 1998), 25.

²⁰ Ripley, 766; Fairbanks, 49-53. After Fairbanks' capture, Confederate soldiers robbed him of his shoes and forced him to walk barefoot for fourteen days. During that time, Fairbanks traveled a distance of 200 miles. Confederates briefly held him at a prisoner of war camp, and then held him for two days in Libby Prison. On August 7, his captors transferred him to Belle Isle where he stayed until September 28, when he was paroled on account of physical disability. He was sent to a hospital in Annapolis, Maryland, for six weeks and then to a hospital in Brattleboro, Vermont. While there, he fell in love with Jane Weathershead, a seventeen-year-old poetess and volunteer nurse. In May 1864, Fairbanks was exchanged and rejoined the 2nd U. S. Sharpshooters in time for the Overland campaign. He remained with his regiment until it disbanded in 1865, fighting the rest of the war with Company G, 4th Vermont Infantry. In 1868, he married Jane Weathershead, the woman who nursed him back to health.

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- ²¹ *OR*, Series 1, 27(1): 518-9.
- ²² Hoisington, 47.
- ²³ Evander Law, "The Struggle for 'Round Top'," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Volume III* (1884-1887, reprinted in New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), 321; Fairbanks, 49-53.
- ²⁴ Law, 321-2.
- ²⁵ John C. West, *A Texan in Search of a Fight: Being the Diary and Letters of a Private Soldier in Hood's Texas Brigade* (Waco, TX: Press of J. S. Hill and Company, 1904), 84-5, 93-4.
- ²⁶ William C. Ward, "Incidents and Personal Experiences on the Battlefield at Gettysburg," *Confederate Veteran* (August, 1900), 347.
- ²⁷ John Bell Hood, *Advance and Retreat: Personal Experiences in the United States and Confederate States Armies* (New Orleans, Privately Printed, 1880), 58-9.
- ²⁸ West, 94.
- ²⁹ Ward, 347.
- ³⁰ *OR*, Series 1, 27 (1): 518-9. See also, Major M.W. Henry's report, *OR*, Series 1, 27(2): 428. Henry reported that during the evening, one of the Rowan Artillery's 3-inch ordnance rifles burst. Although there is no telling what caused this cannon malfunction, it might have been related to the Sharpshooters' silencing of the gun.
- ³¹ Hoisington, 47; Era Jane Pettijohn Chamberlain and Clive Abraham Pettijohn, eds., *Something of the Pettijohn (Pettijohn) Family with Particular Reference to the Descendents of James Pettijohn of Hungar's Parish, Northampton County, Virginia* (Privately Printed, 1948), 15-23.
- ³² Hoisington, 48.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ J. B. Polley, *Hood's Texas Brigade: Its Marches, Its Battles, Its Achievements* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company 1910), 169; Pettijohn and Pettijohn, 22-3.
- ³⁵ *Maine at Gettysburg*, 350; Dalton, 160-1.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Pettijohn and Pettijohn, 23.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-5. Pettijohn spent the rest of the war in Confederate prisons. He remained at Libby Prison until April 1864 when his captors transferred him to a prison camp in Macon, Georgia. During the summer, Confederates again transferred him with other Union officers to Charleston, South Carolina, to be placed under the fire of their own guns. Pettijohn survived this ordeal, received another transfer to "Camp Sorghum" prison in Columbia, and yet another transfer to Raleigh, North Carolina, before he was finally paroled on March 1, 1865. An ardent abolitionist until his dying day (he died in 1924), Pettijohn never forgot his difficult prison experience. Even as late as 1898, he announced, "As I have never been exchanged, I am still at liberty to fight against the rebel government."
- ³⁹ *Maine at Gettysburg*, 351.
- ⁴⁰ *OR*, Series 1, 27(2): 404-7.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 414-5.
- ⁴² John W. Stevens, *Reminiscences of the Civil War: A Soldier in Hood's Texas Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia* (Hillsboro, TX: Hillsboro Mirror Print, 1902), 113-4.
- ⁴³ Stevens, *Berdan's Sharpshooters*, 329.
- ⁴⁴ Stevens, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 114.
- ⁴⁵ Ripley, 766-7. According to the history of Companies E and H, Company H skirted the western base of Big Round Top and came up along the "east side of the gorge," obviously the "Valley of Death." From there, some of them may have joined with Colonel Strong Vincent's brigade of the 5th Corps.
- ⁴⁶ White, 164.
- ⁴⁷ Stevens, *Berdan's Sharpshooters*, 329.
- ⁴⁸ Ward, 347.
- ⁴⁹ Robert T. Coles, *History of the Fourth Regiment Alabama Volunteer Infantry, C.S.A, Army of Northern Virginia*, manuscript copy, 4th Alabama Vertical File (GNMPL), 18-9.
- ⁵⁰ William C. Jordan, *Events and Incidents During the Civil War* (Montgomery, AL: The Paragon Press, 1909), 43.
- ⁵¹ William C. Oates to Joshua L. Chamberlain, 8 March 1897, 15th Alabama Vertical File (GNMPL).
- ⁵² William C. Oates, *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy and its Lost Opportunities* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1905), 210-1; *OR*, Series 1, 27(1): 518-9.
- ⁵³ Morris M. Penny and J. Gary Laine, *Struggle for the Round Tops* (Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1999), 50-1. According to Captain Henry C. Lindsay, commander of the 47th Alabama's three skirmish companies (A, D, and F), once the skirmishers detached, they "marched hurriedly to the right and front towards the enemy posted in

force beyond the bridge across Plum Run.” After crossing the stream, all five skirmish companies moved south of Big Round Top and performed no more fighting.

⁵⁴ White, 164-5.

⁵⁵ West, 94-5; Stevens, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 114; James Jackson to wife, 7 July 1863, 47th Alabama Vertical File (GNMPL).

⁵⁶ Oates to Chamberlain, 8 March 1897; West, 87.

⁵⁷ White, 165.

⁵⁸ *The Portsmouth Journal*, 18 July 1863.

⁵⁹ Oates, *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy*, manuscript facsimile (GNMPL), 6-7.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Jackson to wife, 7 July 1863; Oates, *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy*, manuscript, 7-9.

⁶² Oates, *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy*, manuscript, 9.

⁶³ *OR*, Series 1, 27(1): 519.

⁶⁴ Oates, *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy*, manuscript, 9.

⁶⁵ White, 165.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁶⁷ Oates, *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy*, 219.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 219-220; Ripley, 768. Lieutenant Colonel Bulger’s capture remains a matter of some contention. Two other Union officers, Colonel James Clay Rice of the 44th New York Infantry and Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of the 20th Maine Infantry, also claimed the honor of seizing him. Although the true identity of Bulger’s captor may never be known, Lieutenant Seymour Norton’s claim, bolstered by his ownership of the sword, offers the most plausible explanation.

⁶⁹ Oates to Chamberlain, 8 March 1897.

⁷⁰ Stevens, *Berdan’s Sharpshooters*, 328.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² White, 174.

⁷³ *The Portsmouth Journal*, 18 July 1863.

⁷⁴ White, 172-3.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 173.